

# Ascanius in the *Aeneid*

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Ascanius (or Iulus as he is also called) is one of the most puzzling characters in the *Aeneid* – and, to my mind, one of the least attractive. Son of Aeneas, destined to be the founder of the Julian *gens* (the family of Julius Caesar and Augustus), he is only a boy during the action of the *Aeneid*, and spends much of his time on the sidelines. Just as he has two names (Ascanius and Iulus are used interchangeably), there is something double about his personality: he is at times a young boy, only partially aware of what is going on around him, and sometimes an adolescent, impatient to be recognised as a grown man. Although he is frequently the focus of sentimental reflections on the promise and innocence of the young (whether seen through Aeneas' eyes, or even those of the narrator), we are sometimes given glimpses of a very different side to his character, hard and insensitive.

When he appears in Aeneas' account of the fall of Troy, he is very much the little boy, referred to as *parvus Iulus* (little Iulus) and *Ascanius puer* (the boy Ascanius). Yet despite his age, he still manages to play a crucial role in the unfolding events. For example, it is the miraculous fire that burns harmlessly around his head as a sign from the gods that Aeneas must leave Troy that kick-starts the epic into action. As so often with Vergil, though, this apparently happy symbol is not without darker resonance. Throughout the second book, we have been presented with fires, both real and symbolic, which stand for death and destruction. The sudden appearance of a fire which represents life and the future is, at least, surprising.

## A catalyst for change

It becomes something of a habit for Ascanius to go around acting as a catalyst for events without ever quite seeming to understand what has happened. When the Trojans come to Carthage, they are welcomed by Dido, a childless young widow torn between her desire to remain faithful to her dead husband, and her longing for a new family life with Aeneas. The affair between Dido and Aeneas is often regarded as being about just the two of them, but it isn't. Of course, her overwhelming passion for Aeneas is uppermost in Dido's mind, but she is also deeply fond of Ascanius and painfully conscious of her own childlessness. Yet again, whether he means to or not, Iulus has become an important symbol. He shows Dido what her life might have been like, if only her first husband hadn't been murdered, or if only Aeneas were the type to put love before fame. Iulus, as much as Aeneas, shows her what she cannot have.

Yet Iulus himself seems little scarred by the events of his childhood. The boy who lost his mother in the flames of Troy, and who found a new mother in Carthage, only to see her funeral pyre burning as he and his father sailed away, remains relentlessly up-beat for much of the poem. In the funeral games for Anchises, he and his friends put on a show of horsemanship in a mock battle known as the Troy Game. (Again, Iulus is used to project our minds forward to the Roman future, as this is a custom revived by his descendants, Julius Caesar and Augustus.) In this game, Iulus rides a horse which Dido gave him as a *monimentum et pignus amoris* ('a pledge of her love and something to remember her by'). Yet Ascanius shows no sign of missing Dido, and nor, apparently, is he aware of the significance of the labyrinthine patterns he and his friends are tracing in the dust, which recall the confusions of falling Troy and the ill-starred wanderings of the Trojans to places like Crete and Carthage.

## A callow youth

In a further exercise of youthful insensitivity, Ascanius even plays a part in starting the war in Latium. He is, as is often emphasised in the poem, a keen hunter. Back in Book 4, we saw him cheerfully looking for a boar or a lion to kill while Dido and Aeneas began their unlucky love affair in a secluded cave. In Book 7, he and his dogs go in search of quarry and (with a little help from the Fury Allecto) end up killing a tame stag which belonged to a local girl, Silvia. Her brothers are so enraged that they and their friends attack Iulus, who is in turn defended by his Trojan friends. Partly as a result of Iulus' delight in hunting, war in Latium has begun, and will go on for the rest of the poem. Despite his place at the centre of it all, Ascanius never seems to be as deeply affected by the troubles which surround him as other characters in the *Aeneid*. Left in charge of the Trojan camp while Aeneas goes off to get help from Evander, Iulus decides that the doomed expedition of Nisus and Euryalus is the best idea ever, and enthuses about how brave they both are. He promises to look after Euryalus' mother and says she will be like Creusa to him in all but name. After the tragic deaths of the intrepid pair, the Trojans watch the enemy advancing with the severed heads of Nisus and Euryalus placed on pikes. Euryalus' mother sees her dead son, and cries out in grief. Iulus seems incapable of dealing with his own reaction to the sight, let alone with this mother's hysterical lament, and simply orders her to be packed off inside the camp to stop her upsetting the men. Is this what it means to treat her like Creusa in all but name? Perhaps, having lost his own mother at an early age, he does not really understand how to support her. Neither does he seem too concerned to learn.

Iulus again displays his belligerence and failure to understand the situation properly later on in Book 9. One of the enemy besieging the camp, Numanus Remulus, has been shouting

*At that moment in the quarter of the high air  
Apollo with flowing hair, from a throne of cloud,  
Looked down upon Ausonian troops and town.  
He spoke to the victor, Iulus:*

*'Blessed be  
Your new-found manhood, child. By striving so  
Men reach the stars, dear son of gods  
And sire of gods to come. All fated wars  
Will quiet down, and justly, in the end  
Under descendants of Assaracus,  
For Troy no longer bounds you.'*

*Aeneid* 9.638-44, trans. Robert Fitzgerald

insults at the Trojans, calling them cowards, losers and little better than women. Ascanius, unable to ignore such taunts, rashly stands up on the battlements to fire an arrow at the enemy. Naturally, he hits his target and kills Remulus, but a worried Apollo hurries to tell the young warrior to leave the rest of the fighting to others. And here we hit on one of the difficulties that Ascanius faces. He wants to be part of things, but his grand destiny means that he is not expendable. Unlike other young men in the *Aeneid*, such as Euryalus, Lausus and Pallas, who pay for the bitter-sweet distinction of valour with their own deaths, Iulus cannot be allowed to gamble with his life. He has to survive, or the future of Rome will be in jeopardy. Yet the very fact that he

cannot take real risks or experience real suffering seems to leave a hole in his character.

In Ascanius' last appearance in the poem, Aeneas takes the opportunity for a father-son chat before heading back to the battle. He tells Iulus that he should learn from him how to be brave and work hard, but he must look elsewhere for an example of better luck. His words are modelled on those of Hector to the baby Astyanax and Ajax to his little son Eurysaces. In all three speeches, the father longs to spare his son the kind of pain that he himself endures, yet wants his child to develop the strong moral sense which withstands (and is even developed by) suffering. It seems significant that, despite all that they have experienced together, and for all Iulus' impatience to grow up, Aeneas still regards him as a child, as someone not yet scarred by life, a blank slate. Perhaps that is the best way he can explain to himself his son's surprising resilience in the face of all this horror.

### **A boy without a future**

Iulus, on whom the future depends, is not really allowed his own future. He keeps having to wait, to bide his time. His spirited attack on Numanus Remulus reflects not just the poor judgement of youth but also his eagerness to be allowed to take his part in history. In this, he seems rather different from his father: Aeneas has been forced reluctantly to follow the paths laid out by fate, and knows all too well that being part of history can take its toll on a person's happiness. Iulus, it seems to me, would not be prey to the same kinds of angst and self-doubt. For him, the world is black and white, and pain only temporary and quickly forgotten. Aeneas may like to believe that Ascanius is simply too young to understand all that is happening around him, but it seems remarkable all the same that the young boy remains pretty much unscathed by the repeated traumas of losing his mother, his home, his surrogate mother Dido, his friends Nisus and Euryalus, and then seeing his own father wounded on the battlefield. In the *Aeneid*, suffering is shown to bring wisdom and even virtue to many; it is left unclear whether the suffering Ascanius has witnessed has given him the depth to become a good man, or simply desensitised him.

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